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Quest for gold still drives a nation

A la Carte

By RITA ERLICH

WILL Australia win gold this time at the Olympics? No, I have not been asleep like some fairy-tale character (though it was tempting at times); now that the Olympic Games in Seoul are over, it is the turn of the Culinary Olympics.

The Culinary Olympics are held in Frankfurt every four years. This week, the Australian teams go to Germany to prepare for the week-long competition which begins next week.

The national team is from Queensland, the apprentice team is from Victoria. Last Olympics, the apprentice team — Australia's first — won the gold medal with the highest ever score.

The apprentice team for 1988 is led by Manfred Hennig, who is the chef instructor at Frankston TAFE. There are five apprentices in the team, who were chosen from a short list of 16 from the thousands of apprentice cooks in TAFE colleges. The apprentices are John Casey, Mark Davey, Joanne Wood, Nicholas Wyman, and Jodie-Anne Hooker, and they are all highly regarded in their colleges.

The team, which is sponsored by the Australian Dried Fruits Association, will be required to prepare a dish for 110, and to demonstrate cooking skills in front of an audience as well as the judges.

Their chosen dish, of their own devising, is called Australian Rabbit Fillet Desert Bloom. It is marinated rabbit fillets with a dried apricot and pecan nut farce, surrounded by a coating of fresh herbs and wrapped in crepinette. It will be accompanied by a potato roulade, and Australian spring vegetables.

In 1984, the apprentice team's dish was called Barramundi Carpentaria, and the 80 portions they prepared sold out in 17 minutes to the viewers crowding the exhibition area. We hope the rabbit is just as successful.

I sometimes wonder whether we should have a national dish of rabbit with blackberry sauce — it would be a convenient way of getting rid of two national pests. But blackberries are not among the fruits handled by the Australian Dried Fruits Association.

THE first American Express Golden Plate Awards for Victorian restaurants will be made later this month at the annual ball of the Restaurant and Catering Association of Victoria.

The awards will be presented in seven categories: best seafood, best Asian, best European, best specialised, best country restaurant, best restaurant overall, and best caterer or catering establishment.

The RCA annual ball will be held on 24 October at Nine Darling Street, and there are still some tickets available. The cost is $50 a head for members, $55 for non-members of the association. Inquiries to Doug Browning at the RCA, telephone 819 1311.

COMPETITION is in the air. Claudia Roden, the great writer on Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean food, is arriving in Australia next week to judge a Best Restaurant Awards 1988 competition.

The awards are sponsored by Remy Martin and 'Australian Gourmet with Traveller'. Readers of that magazine, 'The Bulletin' and 'Panorama' were asked to nominate their favorite restaurants (licensed, BYO, and best overall) in any one state.

Ms Roden will select the best in Australia from the six state finalists in that Best Restaurant Overall category. Her decision will be announced in 'Australian Gourmet with Traveller' next February.

WE HAVE had our doubts about the sorbet for some time. But now, in the interests of clear English and unambiguous spelling, I think it is time it was banned. I recently saw a menu in an eating establishment which offered sorbet as a "palette cleanser". I wouldn't eat anything that was recommended for that purpose.

ANTHONY HIGGINS of the Australia Club, who was head judge of the Catering Institute of Australia's 'National Student Waiter of the Year', thought highly of the seven state finalists.

"I felt that the general attitude and appearance was perfect. Whether they were good at the job or not, they would have got away with murder," he said.

A new definition of what makes a good waiter?

The winner of the title for 1988 is Quoi Tri Lan, who works at the Crest Hotel in Brisbane. Steven Williams (Hyatt, Canberra) was second, and Andrew Worsnop from Burnham Beeches was third.

A new gold rush at the chef's Olympics

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By RITA ERLICH

THE Australian apprentice team has done it again. The team, from Victoria, won a gold medal at the Culinary Olympics, held last week in Frankfurt.

Four years ago, at the last Culinary Olympics, Australia's first competing apprentice team won a gold medal — rather to the surprise of some of the other competing countries. This time, the skill of Australian apprentice cooks has been confirmed. The team won eight points ahead of the West German apprentice team, which won the silver medal. The Canadian team was third.

Team members were John Casey, Mark Davey, Joanne Wood, Nicholas Wyman, and Jodie-Anne Hooker, and they were led by Manfred Hennig, chef instructor at Frankston TAFE. The team, which was sponsored by the Australian Dried Fruits Association, prepared marinated rabbit fillets with a dried apricot and pecan nut farce, surrounded by a coating of fresh herbs and wrapped in a crepinette.

It was a popular dish with members of the public: all 115 portions of the dish had sold out within 35 minutes. The team also had to demonstrate their skills in front of an audience as well as the judges.

The Victorian regional team did just as well as the apprentice team. It won four gold medals on the first day of the Culinary Olympics, and its gold medal tally was high enough for the team to be awarded a Grand Prix.

SEPARATE Tables in Acland Street has been sold. John Herbert, who was the chef at Champagne Charlies when it was owned by Iain and Sandra Hewitson, left to start his own small restaurant in St Kilda last year. He and his partner have sold it, but John Herbert will remain in the industry. Not in the kitchen this time, but front of house, at Paysan, that fine little place in South Yarra.

A successful team, from left: Jodie-Anne Hooker, Mark Davey, Manfred Hennig, Nicholas Wyman, Claire Chambers (director of the Dried Fruits Association), John Casey and Joanne Wood.

THERE have been major changes at Hyatt on Collins. Starting at the top: Christian Le Prince, the general manager, is now back in France and has been succeeded by Michael Gray, who is in charge of both Hyatt on Collins and the Hyatt in Canberra. For the moment, anyway — energetic as he is, he must soon come to Melbourne full-time.

Max's, the seafood restaurant, has just celebrated its second birthday and it now has a new chef and a new manager. The new chef is Michael Tafe, a talented man with experience in the Regent of Sydney and the Beverly Wilshire in Los Angeles. At first tasting, he is doing an excellent job at Max's and the food I ate was a delicious combination of skill and imagination.

Patrick Murray, who used to be the chef at Max's, has moved into the banqueting department.

Jean Martin Fleish, who was the restaurant manager, has become the assistant food and beverage manage of the hotel. The new manager is Olivier Ferretjans, a lean Frenchman who worked with the Roux brothers in London for some years.

STEPHANIE ALEXANDER is about to make her name in London. She has been invited to be guest chef at a series of dinners hosted by the 'Observer' newspaper, following on from Anton Mosimann, Raymond Blanc and Kem Hom.

She will also be preparing a luncheon for the London food media at the Inn on the Park. The dishes will be taken from her book 'Feasts and Stories', to launch the book in Britain.

Chefs cannot take it easy. Most people, when books are launched, are obliged only to be available for interviews, but chefs like Stephanie must prepare a meal as well. It saves the publishers the cost of a cocktail party, I suppose.

Stephanie will return to the Inn on the Park in February, and will be preparing a week's lunches and dinners there.

THE Frankfurt culinary Olympic successes may well reinforce German interest in Australian food. The exhibition company which stages International Green Week in Berlin is keen to see Australian participation in the event, which focuses on agriculture, horticulture and the food industry.

Axel Thimm, director of AMK Berlin (the exhibition company), was in Australia recently to attract Australians to International Green Week. The agricultural exhibition was first held in 1926, and Mr Thimm was quick to point out that it had nothing to do with the Green Party in Germany.

The fair is now often used to test-market new foodstuffs. Mr Thimm said that kiwi fruit had been introduced to Germany via the fair, and he thought there would be interest in Australian dairy products, meat, seafood, fruit and vegetables, as well as our "excellent wine".

THE revived partnership of Harry Murphy, Annie Mahon and Iain Hewitson has flowered again in the Lord Newry Hotel. Hewitson was chef at The Lemon Tree when he first arrived in Australia to work, when the Murphys turned it into a modern pub with good food.

Then he made his name with increasingly adventurous food at Clichy and then at Fleurie. He has taken on a new role in the past year, as a creator of menus. He is largely responsible for the food style at Alphington House, the wine bar next to The Lemon Tree, and he has devised the new menus for the Lord Newry.

The old pub hsa had a facelift, so to speak, and is now looking light and airy. The downstairs restaurant is now called a bar and grill; the delicious little snug bar will become an area for pre-dinner drinks.

The menu is simple, a return to provincial French-style food. There are pleasant ironies in all of this: Hewitson, who did so much to bring Asian influences into cooking in Melbourne, seems to have turned his back on all of that. So it is back to pork rillettes and gratineed French onion soup at Lord Newry, and those who have longed for mashed potatoes instead of the ubiquitous French fries will find them here, with sausages and chutney. There is even a steak sandwich, or Hewitson's spicy version of it.

A good finish to the meal: Walter Bourke's goat cheese served with a small salad and extra virgin olive oil.